F L E X I B L E WORK ARRANGEMENTS CAN OFTEN BE THE KEY TO A SUCCESSFUL AND SATISFIED WORK FORCE. A William M. Mercer survey reports compelling reasons for instituting flexible work arrangements as part of a strategy to increase recruitment and retention:

  ◎ 26% of employees surveyed would switch jobs for access to flextime
  ◎ 23% would change jobs for flex place or telecommuting opportunities
  ◎ 12% would change jobs in order to work part time

"Flexibility is a business strategy, not an accommodation," says Linda Marks of New Ways to Work in San Francisco. Just as businesses develop strategies for new products and markets, so too must they create new strategies for remaining competitive in the labor market.

A Look at the Utah Workforce

Utah's business community has a young, highly educated and hardworking workforce.

Utah workers are young...
> The median age in Utah is 26 years and the pool of young workers is expected to increase 60% by the year 2020, ensuring the youngest workforce in the nation for that entire time.

They are parents...
> Utah has the highest birth rate and the largest household size in the nation.

Many are mothers...
> The percentage of working mothers in Utah is higher than the national average. In Utah, 59% of mothers with preschool age children and 74% of mothers with school-age children work.

They are highly educated...
> Utah has the highest literacy rate in the country and the second highest percentage of high school graduates.

And they are hard working...
> The people of Utah have a strong work ethic. Major companies that have relocated to Utah report that productivity is 25-30% higher in their Utah facilities than at other locations.

Source: Utah Division of Business and Economic Development/Office of Work & Family Life

Utah employers can benefit greatly by acknowledging the changes in the workforce. Their employees balance multiple roles and responsibilities as employees, parents, students, caregivers of elderly relatives, and citizens. Employers would do well to examine their basic assumptions about work, time and employee autonomy. One of the liveliest debates focuses on the concept of "face time" and the belief that long hours at work necessarily correlate with enhanced productivity and career commitment. Another value challenged by the changing workforce is the "one size fits all" work day. The changing work force of the 21st century requires re-examination of traditional notions about the time and place for work.

What Are the Options for Flexibility?

There are many models of flexible work arrangements than can be tailored to fit company needs while addressing employee concerns. The following programs can be adjusted to meet the unique requirements of any business.

Compressed Work Week:
Employees work more than 8 hours a day and fewer than 5 days per week. Common models are: **The 4/10:** Four 10 hour days per week; **The 3/12:** Three 12 hour days per week; **"Summer hours"** year-round in which employees work longer days Monday through Thursday, with a half day on Friday.

Flextime
Full time employees schedule their work with flexible starting and ending times but generally are required to work a standard number of hours within a given time period.

Part-time Work
Employees have a permanent reduced work schedule or temporary part time on return from parenting leave. Salary and benefits are pro-rated.

Job Sharing
Two employees share the work and responsibility of one full time job with pro-rated salary and benefits. During busy times, an expanded schedule for each employee can be negotiated.

Telecommuting
Employees work from home or another location by linking to the central office by computer and telephone.

Flexplace
Employees work at home or at another location with or without a computer; this option may address employees with unusual health situations, such as severe allergies, fractures or disabilities.

Family Leave Time
Paid or unpaid periods of time away from work without loss of employment right; reasons for leave can be for paternity/maternity, adoption, extended illness for self or family member, and personal business needs.

Why Implement Flexible Work Arrangements?

There are a number of factors that contribute to making the business rationale for flexibility. The experience of other companies demonstrates that, depending on the option chosen, flexible work arrangements will address:

Business Needs

- Flexible work arrangements enhance retention and recruitment because they're popular with employees;
- They extend hours of service and production by staggering teams while allowing employees an extra day off each week;
- They can expand the use of equipment because of a longer work day;
- They help reduce tardiness and absenteeism because workers do not commute during rush hours and have more personal time for appointments and errands;
- They help retain experienced employees as employees' life situations change and reduced work schedules become necessary in order to keep working;
- In some cases, they can reduce labor costs without losing experienced people and having to train new employees;
- They facilitate education and training because of more flexibility in work schedules;
- They allow more efficient scheduling during slow or peak demand for service;
- They can allow for a broader range of skills and experience when one job benefits from the skills of two people who share one job;
- Flexible arrangements help reduce the demand for office space and overhead expenses with fewer workers at the office or with less expensive satellite office rental space;
- They facilitate efficient use of equipment because it can be used outside of traditional work hours;
- They often improve management effectiveness by changing from managing by presence to managing for results;
- They can reduce labor costs by extending operating times and reducing start-ups and shutdowns;
- They improve scheduling for peak workloads by overlapping shifts.

Employee Needs

- Reduced stress because employees can more easily balance work and personal lives;
- Time during regular business hours to take care of personal needs, such as doctor's appointments, errands and school conferences;
- Possibility for upward mobility by pairing a senior worker with a less experienced worker;
- Increased knowledge because staff coverage may be lighter which facilitates cross training.

Customer Service Needs

Flexibility does not just benefit your company and your workforce. It often has a surprisingly positive impact on customers as well:

- It can help serve customers in different time zones because of extended service hours;
- It can offer better coverage and continuity because the job sharers know the job and cover for each other.

Community Needs

Other benefits of flexible work arrangements are sometimes seen outside the workplace and in the community:

- They can help companies comply with Clean Air Act regulations because workers commute less in the case of telecommuters or job sharers, or at off-peak hours in the case of flextime workers;
- They allow employees to schedule time for getting involved in community issues or needs.

Building a Business Case for Flexibility

There are a number of trends contributing to the need for flexibility. These include the fact that American business increasingly faces international competition, changing demographics, and the blurring of boundaries between employees' personal and work lives. The growth and accelerated change in technology are also significant in creating the demand for flexibility and the opportunity for a corporate response. Each company can develop its own workplace flexibility policies based on its market, competitors and workforce.

Planning for flexibility is similar to planning for other new business initiatives. Steps may include the following:

Research:

- Survey employees about their interest and needs for flexibility;
- Investigate what other companies have implemented;
- Collect information on flexible policies, even informal or unwritten policies already in place within your own organization.

Development of Business Objectives:

- Define the business objectives and the desired outcomes of a flexibility initiative.

Clarification of the Rationale for Flexibility:

- To improve retention and recruitment of workers;
- To reallocate labor, staff peak demand hours, cross-train employees, or extend service;
- To avoid or minimize lay offs;
- To create an image as the employer of choice;
- To respond to mandates: The Family and Medical Leave Act, the Americans with Disabilities Act, and the Clean Air Act;
- To build employee morale and commitment;
- To respond to cost concerns related to turnover, absenteeism or overstaffing.

Identify and Address Potential Barriers to Implementing Flexible Work Arrangements. These may include:

- General skepticism or lack of support from management;
- Concerns about the impact on client or customer service;
- Attitudes of unions or contract negotiation issues;
- Matters related to supervision and business systems;
- Issues related to cost of benefits, headcount and administration;
- State and federal labor laws;
- Fear of setting a precedent or losing management control.

How Do We Change?

Culture change affects all levels of an organization. In planning flexibility programs, each level plays an important role.

> **"New work patterns are not just minor changes in work schedules. They are an adjustment in the sociotechnical system of the company. As such they entail a significant culture shift for most organizations."**

Managers:

Managers should clearly state their support and commitment to increased flexibility. To support a new initiative, management can ensure that resources are committed to a thoughtful and detailed planning process, policy development, training of supervisors and employees and that plans are made to evaluate and revise flexibility programs as needed. Company leaders may wish to contact other companies that have implemented flexibility programs to learn from their challenges and successes.

Supervisors:

One of the key elements in the success of flexibility programs is the attitude of supervisors. Flexible programs require a supervisory style built on planning, coordination, good communication and egalitarian participation. The emphasis in employee reviews may change from time-based supervision to evaluation of results—the quality of an employee's work and the projects completed. Maintaining contact with off-site employees can be accomplished by scheduling regular meetings in the office, by email and telephone. These new work patterns generally require training for both supervisors and employees to ensure success. Supervisor "buy-in" to the flexibility program is a critical component in employees' comfort with participation in the new programs.

Employees:

Opportunities for flexibility are often attractive to employees, but they can also be intimidating. Several corporate representatives mentioned the need for employee accountability, for training employees to think like entrepreneurs: "Show me how you can get the job done and why flexibility works for the company" was one manager's request. Another urged employees to "think of it like a good marriage—there should be communication checkpoints between workers and management."

Sources:

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